

2 February 1989

Dear Nina,

Thank you for your letters of January 25 and 26 and for the parcel of books and photocopied letters. We are still reading and enjoying the latter.

We decided to write separate answers as I (that is Joetla--nobody calls me 'Balbir', all our friends and Susan use my last name) think Susan's on my approaches to your letter will be slightly different. I am not an Abhidhamma scholar, while Susan is very intrigued by that aspect of Buddha Dhamma. I tend to rely more on the Suttas. Susan's letter will take a bit longer.

My approach to the Dhamma is to take the Teachings of the Buddha in their entirety -- i.e. the Four Noble Truths -- and for practice to do the best I can in following the Eight Fold Noble Path. My temperament demands following a technique of practice which will enable me to experience all the seven Visuddhis including the ten Vipassana Nanas. Having a good teacher as a guide is insurance against falling into the traps of the subtle defilements (upakkilesa) which one often experiences during the stage of udayabbaya nana. We think that we are fortunate to have in Mother Sayana, Saya U Chit Tin, Saya U Tint Yee and Saya U Ba Pho teachers/guides to point out and help us guard against the trap of the subtle defilements.

As body is in a state of constant change and flux, the ability to feel this process happening throughout the body is experiencing Anicca. This experience also becomes instrumental in developing insight into the Anatta nature of mind and body. Sometimes this experience brings into sharp focus the Dukkha nature of all conditioned phenomena as well. Thus the insight into the First Noble Truth becomes more and more clear.

People do not necessarily appreciate the significance of the sensations produced in the body by the process of Anicca because they have never felt it. Let us use a feeling of heat as an example. The only heat sensations most people know have external causes -- like a fire or the sunshine. But when meditating one can on occasion feel similarly intense heat generated from purely internal sources. This happens if the tejo element in the kalapas for some reason becomes predominant, as the kalapas rapidly change. So this internal heat is a direct produce of the changing nature of the kalapas. And the experience of this Anicca process of the body enables one to readily see also the Anatta nature of the body and of the feelings arising dependent on it.

Since kalapas have a lot of akasa between them, as mind gets more concentrated it is possible to feel the body as a mass of tiny vibrations without any sense of solidity or weight. With still greater awareness the rising and falling process turns into an experience of dissolving phenomena. The word 'dissolving' is not used as a figure of speech here. At such times one actually feels that this body which is a mass of energy is continually rapidly dissolving. I will not say more about this process here.

During our regular practice as well as in our daily lives we learn -- along with feeling the Anicca sensations in the body -- to observe the kilesas arising in the mind as well. It appears to me that in this technique one does not have to wrestle too much intellectually with the problem of why everything is Anatta. Rather, insight into Anatta grows out of this direct experience of Anicca. I will give a brief quotation from "Magganga Dipani" in Manuals of Buddhism by the Ven. Ledi Sayadaw on this subject. (p.249)

By repeated and persistent practice of that meditation on the knowledge of the Right Understanding of the arising and dissolutions (udayabbaya nana) of the psycho-physical elements (nama-rupa) permeates through the whole body. The first stage of personality belief (sakkaya ditthi) in regard to the whole body disappears. The first stage of personality belief which has accompanied one's life-continuum throughout the beginningless round of rebirths is completely extinguished. The whole body is thus transformed into the sphere of Right View.

The Teachings of the Buddha are so vast and varied that people of all temperaments can find in them an appropriate method for them to develop panna and thus eliminate their defilements.

We certainly would like to meet Khun Sujin if we ever go to Bangkok. But since we do not travel much these days (travelling has become so expensive), this will probably not happen in the near future.

I thank you and very much appreciate the time you have taken to write to us. It is wonderful to realise that people like you in the West are pursuing the Path of Dhamma with such earnestness and dedication. India is a land where Buddhas are born, but the wrong view which is present here now is quite horrendous. Nonetheless, we feel most fortunate to have the paramis to practise the Dhamma.

I share all my merits with you.

Sincerely,

Balvir S. Gootla